

## Integrating the teaching, learning and assessment of communication with children within the qualifying social work curriculum

Article (Accepted Version)

Lefevre, Michelle (2015) Integrating the teaching, learning and assessment of communication with children within the qualifying social work curriculum. *Child and Family Social Work*, 20 (2). pp. 211-222. ISSN 1356-7500

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## **Abstract**

Qualifying social work education must provide students with a variety of experiential, personalised, participatory, didactic and critically reflective learning opportunities across both the taught curriculum and in practice placements if deep learning of the capabilities needed for effective communication with children and young people is to be ensured. At present, programmes in England are not consistent in the curriculum structures, content and pedagogical approaches they are employing to teach and assess this topic. This paper discusses first how current proposals for the reform of qualifying education in England do not address the ambiguities and discretion in regulatory guidance which have meant that the place and relevance of this topic within the curriculum remain uncertain and contested. It then draws on a model of the sequencing of students' learning and development in qualifying training, developed through the author's recent empirical research, to present an integrated and coherent approach to the teaching, learning and assessment of this topic. It is proposed that this strategy will enable students to develop the generic, 'child-focused' and 'applied child-specialist' capabilities they need for the 'Knowing', 'Being' and 'Doing' of effective communication with children.

## **Introduction**

Recent research by this author presented findings from the first empirical study in the UK into factors and processes which enable social work students to develop the knowledge, skills, values and personal qualities they need to communicate effectively with children (Lefevre, 2012). It was observed that a superficial focus on the 'doing' of communication (methods, techniques and skills) was inadequate for students to develop capability across the range of social work roles and tasks. Instead, qualifying courses needed to provide a variety of experiential, personalised, participatory, didactic and critically reflective pedagogical opportunities across both the taught curriculum and in practice placements to ensure deep, embodied learning of the capabilities needed. That study concluded by sketching the sequence of students' learning and development through their qualifying training, modelled in Lefevre (under review).

Here, more in-depth consideration is given to the implications of research findings, including from that study, for developing approaches to teaching and learning within qualifying education. As this is a time of significant curriculum remodelling in England, the discussion is situated within the processes and procedures of that country. However, the model of the teaching, learning and assessment sequence is potentially applicable to education in other countries which share a similar conception of what constitutes social work practice with children. The paper begins with a review of the place of communication with children in the English qualifying curriculum and is followed by a brief summary of what is known about the most helpful approaches to teaching and learning regarding this topic. Three strands of potential learning opportunities are then considered which might enable students to develop the generic, 'child-focused' and 'applied child-specialist' capabilities needed for the 'Knowing', 'Being' and 'Doing' of effective communication with children.

## **Current developments in social work education in England**

Social work programmes in England are currently being remodelled in the light of new requirements and recommendations for social work practice and education. Firstly, new 'standards of proficiency' have been developed by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2012), which has taken over as statutory regulator of the profession in England following the abolition of the General Social Care Council (GSCC). Revisions to curriculum structures and content have also been recommended by the College of Social Work, which is the new professional body for social work in England. The College has inherited a suite of proposals from the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB, 2010a,b) as part of its

implementation of the reports of the Social Work Task Force (SWTF, 2009a,b), which had been charged by Government with undertaking a comprehensive review of frontline social work practice in order to make recommendations for improvement and reform of the profession. The College's recommendations have been broadly accepted by the sector as a way of achieving consistent high standards for qualifying education, although uncertainty remains at the time of writing regarding the extent to which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) will fully comply, given that they are not mandatory. Programmes which believe themselves to be implementing the reforms to a high standard can apply for voluntary 'endorsement' by the College, which is likened to a 'kite-mark of quality over and above that of HCPC approval' (College of Social Work, 2012a, p.3).

The College reforms are not tied in to HCPC registration requirements but there is some overlap between the two sets of standards. All social workers in England must be able to demonstrate that they have the knowledge and abilities to understand and comply with the HCPC Standards of Proficiency and qualifying programmes must be able to demonstrate they have prepared practitioners to meet them. The College (2012b) has introduced a Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), which includes standards and thresholds to guide assessment of progression and outcomes at key points in qualifying training and indicators against which social workers' performance will be measured at every stage of their career.

As both new sets of standards indicate what is expected of social workers when they finish their training and start practising, each has implications for the structure and content of qualifying social work education and has resulted in a flurry of activity regarding programme revision. It would be unfortunate if this period of reformation became merely an administrative process, carried out solely to comply with regulator requirements and professional body recommendations, as it offers the opportunity for key aspects of curriculum provision to be re-considered in the light of developing knowledge about the conceptualisations of central issues and how they might best be taught and learned. The College of Social Work (2012c) is producing a series of guides to support current curriculum development. However, a limited evidence base means that gaps in knowledge remain about what kinds of pedagogical approaches might support the achievement of desired outcomes in student capability and proficiency and there continues to be wide variation in how individual programmes approach many topics (Carpenter, 2011).

## **The place of communication with children in the curriculum**

One area of social work practice which would benefit from further consideration in this current period of curriculum reform is communication with children and young people. Despite legal and policy directives to consult, inform, support, involve and listen to children, numerous research studies and serious case reviews have expressed concern about the quality of social workers' engagement and direct work with children (see for example Horwath, 2010; Ofsted, 2011; Morgan, 2011). The heavy caseloads with over-burdening administrative demands endemic in statutory contexts (Broadhurst et al, 2010) have clearly played a part in the time and energy social workers have to create the kinds of trusting contexts within which children feel safe to explore and confide complex and sensitive matters and it is essential that resources to support practice, including manageable caseloads and good supervision, are made available to practitioners (Munro, 2011). However, it cannot be assumed that these are the only reasons that social workers lack the confidence, motivation and capability needed for engaging and communicating directly with children in challenging roles and contested situations: knowledge, skills and the capacity for informed use of self appear also to be variable (Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2005; Winter, 2009). The extent to which qualifying education has prepared students sufficiently and consistently for direct practice must, in consequence, be considered.

Standards within social work education in England have raised concern for some time now. Following disquiet about how inadequate social work practice might be adversely affecting the experiences and outcomes for children in care, the previous government reassured the public and profession that it would:

look at the social work qualifying degrees to ensure they equip social workers with the knowledge and skills to work in a modern children's workforce .... ensuring that social work students are properly trained in the tools and experiences they need to do their jobs ... (and) that they are trained to be able to listen effectively to the views of children and young people in care (DfES, 2007, p. 127).

Key concerns have related to what is included within the curriculum and whether threshold standards set by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are consistently high. The official review of child protection in England by Lord Laming (2009), commissioned following the public outcry over the death of Peter Connolly ('Baby P'), suggested that the generic nature of the qualifying degree meant there was

insufficient focus on equipping social workers with the specialist knowledge and skills needed for practice with vulnerable children. A cross-party select committee also queried this point and questioned the variability in standards set for assessment of qualifying students (House of Commons, 2009). The Social Work Task Force (SWTF, 2009a) heard evidence and feedback from employers, practice assessors and researchers that newly qualified social workers were (among other concerns) lacking some of the practical face-to-face skills needed for their roles; the Association of Directors of Children's Services, for example, recommended that qualifying training should provide more specialisation in work with children and their families, including how practitioners should engage and communicate with children. Following such representations, the final report of the Task Force (SWTF, 2009b) named communication with children as among the areas not being covered in sufficient depth in the English social work degree.

This issue was also raised by a further independent review of the child protection system in England commissioned by the current government. Professor Eileen Munro's final report (2011) suggested that limitations in practice were not only caused by over-burdened, bureaucratised workplace practices and poor quality supervision but inadequate training for direct work. To ensure practice was more consistently child-centred, her Recommendation 11 advised that the PCF should be revised to:

"incorporate capabilities necessary for child and family social work... [to] explicitly inform social work qualification training, postgraduate professional development and performance appraisal" (Munro, 2011, p.12).

However, such a recommendation, if implemented, would depart from how the social work degree has dealt with the development of students' competence in direct practice with user groups who have additional requirements regarding communication and engagement, such as adults with learning disabilities, older people with dementia, or, indeed, children. The National Occupational Standards for Social Work, which students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have had to demonstrate at the point of qualification (Department of Health, 2002), are framed solely in generic terms. This absence of a universal requirement that students undertake or are assessed on direct practice with children has left individual Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and placement providers free to determine the extent to which students are provided with opportunities for direct work with children and focused skills teaching which might support this.

### ***Findings from surveys and audits of practice***

This generic focus is likely to have contributed to the lack of consistency and agreement about the place, focus, level and method of teaching of communication with children in the qualifying curriculum which was found in two studies in the last decade. The first was a 'practice survey' of the position and status of communication with children in qualifying programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland conducted by this author and colleagues in 2005-6 as part of a Knowledge Review funded by SCIE (Luckock et al, 2006). Analysis of data from 38 programme handbooks from 29 HEIs and telephone interviews with respondents from 32 HEIs revealed that communication with children was obscured and often marginalised within the taught curriculum, incorporated, often fortuitously, within modules focusing on core generic communication skills, applied practice skills or broader aspects of social work with children and families. There appeared to be little coherence within programmes regarding how underpinning knowledge, such as how children's developmental stage might influence the method of communication, or how statutory requirements for children's participation fitted with the learning of embodied skills or personal qualities needed for face-to-face interactions. Disparities and uncertainties regarding the quality and availability of practice learning opportunities meant there was no guarantee that, at the point of qualification, social work students would have had the opportunity for direct contact and interactions with a child, even when placed in statutory children's service settings.

Programmes were struggling to articulate explicit expectations regarding both the learning outcomes for communication with children and the standards students were expected to attain. It was most common for students to be provided with a foundation of generic communication skills plus some basic 'child-focused' proficiencies early in their programme. 'Child-focused' is here defined as generalist attributes and skills drawn on when engaging, playing and talking with children in diverse contexts, in contrast to the more specialist capabilities which might be required to addressing the challenges and constraints engendered by communication within social work tasks and contexts. Rarely did programmes offer opportunities for students to develop what I have termed 'applied child-specialist' capabilities - those needed for communication with children within the complexities and constraints of the social work role, for example, assessing abused or traumatised children within child protection investigations, or consulting with children as part of decision-making in care proceedings.

Approaches to teaching this topic tended to be variable and unsystematic, commonly predicated on the commitments, interests and expertise of those available to teach the topic and the resources at their disposal, rather than on coherent, transparent pedagogical principles. Most HEIs focused on skills acquisition, with capability in (usually adult-focused) communication positioned as a set of techniques and behaviours which could be learned through workshops and 'skills-labs' using role play or simulated interviews with service users (for example, Moss et al, 2007). Some also prioritised the development of 'use of self' in direct work, using group-based, experiential and interactive methods, drawing on both psychosocial approaches, such as child observation (Briggs, 1992), and participatory learning strategies, to develop students' capacity for emotional engagement and ethical commitments to good practice (Boylan et al, 2000).

A subsequent audit of social work qualifying programmes in Wales alone (Taylor & Boushel, 2009) reported that, several years on, the nature, quality and extent of teaching and learning of communication skills with children was similarly obscured, disparate and marginalised within curricula. There seemed to be a "lack of an overarching approach or connective tissue" (p.17) with the researchers struggling to identify whether and where communication with children might be learned within a programme, or even if it should. Only two of the eight programmes in the sample considered communication with children to be a core element of the taught curriculum. Of the others, three programmes provided only one or two specific sessions dispersed across the curriculum and a further three provided no classroom teaching on communication with children at all. HEIs struggled to clarify how much direct contact with children their students were, or should be, having during placements.

The large scale three-year survey of the qualifying programme in England (Department of Health et al, 2008) was not able to provide additional clarification of these issues as it did not enquire specifically into how communication *with children*, rather than generic skills, was taught. While almost 90% of the student participants had received at least one placement in a children's service setting, there was no discussion of the extent to which practice learning opportunities offered direct engagement and communication with children.

### ***Current plans for reform***

The uncertainties and inconsistencies noted in practice cross-nationally will not necessarily be addressed by current proposals for curriculum reform. Munro's Recommendation 11 has not been



incorporated into the PCF, which remains as generically focused as the National Occupational Standards. As before, there is a broad expectation that courses should ensure learning covers all ages and service user groups; for example, a general directive under domain 7.1, 'Intervention and Skills' states that students should demonstrate at the point of qualification that they can:

Identify and apply a range of verbal, non-verbal and written methods of communication and adapt them in line with peoples' age, comprehension and culture [domain 7.1] (College of Social Work, 2012a).

Standard 8 of the HCPC Standards of Proficiency similarly requires social workers to "understand how the means of communication should be modified to address and take account of a range of factors including age [and] capacity" and be aware "of how the characteristics and consequences of verbal and non-verbal communication....can be affected by....age" (HCPC, 2012, p.10). In neither are children specifically named.

Children have been mentioned specifically in several places in the Curriculum Guide on Communication Skills (Koprowska, 2011), one of the College of Social Work's resources for programme re-development. It advises that a generic qualifying programme should provide students with 'foundation skills', and that 'more specialised and challenging topics ... may be introduced in the classroom and on placement [which] will only be consolidated through post-qualification experience and learning' (Koprowska, 2011, p.2). 'Communicating with children, using play, art and developmentally appropriate activities' and 'Speech, language and communication issues in adolescents' are included in this category. However, the level which constitutes *introduced* and *foundation* is not defined, and as these are suggested only as optional rather than a requirement, much discretion remains.

This Curriculum Guide does, however, make some overarching statements about the positioning and approach which programmes could or should take to the teaching of (generic) communication skills through the curriculum, which might contribute to a more consistent pedagogical approach cross-nationally:

Communication skills are a connecting thread throughout the qualifying curriculum, developed both in classrooms and in practice placements. Classroom learning can usefully take place at two stages: prior to first placement (assessed as part of 'readiness to practise'); and prior to/during final placement, when more complex and challenging issues can be addressed.

Learning about communication is an important part of the '30 days' designated for practice-related work at university (Koprowska, 2011, p.1).

The importance of 'connective tissue' is also highlighted in this Curriculum Guide, with specific links drawn between communication skills and other relevant curriculum areas such as 'Childhood development: how children and young people communicate at different developmental stages'. Considering the significance of age to communication with service users across the lifespan is also emphasised for tasks such as assessment of risk and vulnerability.

The PCF's non-specific approach means that programmes will continue to have discretion regarding how much attention should be given to teaching child-focused and applied child-specialist capabilities and the level at which they should assess students' competence in these. Such discretion is likely to perpetuate the marginalised position of communication with children in the curriculum and the diverging practices cross-nationally. The expectation appears to be that a layer of specialisation in the final year of the qualifying training, boosted through opportunities to develop more specialised expertise within an Assessed and Supported (first) Year in Employment (SWRB, 2010b), will ensure students are ready for practice. Without more specific requirements or guidance, however, it seems unlikely that curriculum content, pedagogical approaches or standards of assessment will ensure the high quality practice that children should be able to expect consistently from their social workers.

## **An integrated approach to including communication with children in qualifying programmes**

Increased awareness of curriculum structures, pedagogical strategies and teaching content associated with effective social work communication with children should assist HEIs who are currently revising programmes to ensure that this topic is included in a coherent and integrated way. Some research evidence on this matter is available, but it is limited. Systematic reviews conducted by this author and colleagues have previously reported the evidence base for both the practice approaches which support effective communication and the pedagogical strategies most likely to promote students' development of capability (Luckock *et al.*, 2006). A follow-up paper (Lefevre *et al.*, 2008) refined this further to evolve a taxonomy of the key capabilities needed for communication with children (abbreviated here as CCWC) and how these might be taught across the curriculum. The

CCWC are categorised within domains of ‘Knowing’ (underpinning understanding of children and what affects their communication), ‘Doing’ (skills, methods and techniques for practice), and Being (use of self, encompassing (i) ethical commitments/values and (ii) personal qualities and emotional capacity). The taxonomy could potentially be used both by students as a tool for appraising their learning needs and by practice educators as a framework for analysing students’ level of proficiency. Table 1 shows the CCWC taxonomy mapped against the indicators in the PCF, offering a particular framework for England.

*Table 1 Mapping of the taxonomy of Communicative Capabilities with Children against the Professional Capabilities Framework*

Domain	Dimensions	Descriptors	PCF
<b>KNOWING</b>  <b>Knowing about children and their worlds and how best to work with them within the context of social work roles and tasks</b>	Child development	Able to draw critically on research evidence about social, intellectual and psychobiological development to tailor communication to children’s capacities.	5.3 5.6
	Additional communication needs	Understanding how children encountered within social work contexts have additional communication needs due to disabilities or the effects of adverse experiences	5.4 5.7
	Purpose and mandate	Clarity about the role and purpose of communication with children, and their right to participation, mandated by specialist social work roles and framed by law, policy, practice guidance and ethical frameworks.	2.8 5.2 7.11 8.2
	Knowing the particular child	Awareness of the importance of getting to know each child within the family, cultural and social context so that their manner of communication, including strengths as well as vulnerabilities, is understood.	5.4 5.5 5.7
	Evidence-based practice	Knowledge about models, approaches and methods known to be effective in communicating with children.	5.8 5.11
	Constraining factors	Awareness of how the social work context, power relations, prior experiences and worker approach may interrupt or constrain mutual communication and understanding.	3.5 5.5
	Cultural interpretation	Awareness of the role played by culture, religion, ethnicity and habitus in the way information is encoded and interpreted between social workers and children	3.1 3.2
<b>BEING</b>	Core social work values	Embodying core social work values so that children feel safe to communicate (includes openness, honesty and transparency; reliability and consistency; respectfulness; dedication; attention to confidentiality).	1.5 2.1 2.6 2.7

<b>Being able to embody core social work values, make ethical commitments and draw upon personal qualities and emotional capacities through child-centred use of self</b>	Anti-oppressive	Working non-judgmentally and anti-oppressively to mitigate unequal power relations, stereotyping, disadvantage and discrimination based on race, culture, gender, class, sexuality, disability, health and age.	3.2 3.3 3.5
	Promoting participation	Personally committed to promoting children's rights and capacity to participate in assessment, decision making, planning and review	2.5 3.3
	Relating sincerely & genuinely	Embodying sincerity, genuineness and congruence so that the child encounters a relating human being, not just a professional persona.	7.3
	Empathic, robust and authoritative	Being empathic, emotionally robust and authoritative enough to recognise and respond appropriately to children's strong feelings and challenging behaviour, whilst maintaining appropriate boundaries.	1.9 1.11 7.11
	Self-aware	Able to acknowledge and manage own feelings and subjectivities and the impact on practice of own personal experiences/histories and values.	1.7 2.2 2.3
	Working with depth processes	Able to work with depth processes that arise in engagements with children, such as projection, splitting, and counter-transference, and with children's complex feelings and internal worlds.	1.7 7.3
	Relating in a caring manner	Genuinely caring about children so that, by expressing enthusiasm, compassion, warmth, friendliness, kindness, humour, supportiveness and concern, children feel they really matter.	1.7 7.3
	Playful & creative	Being able to be playful and creative and feel comfortable in using the 'hundred languages of childhood'.	6.1
<b>DOING</b>  <b>Child-centred methods, skills and techniques for effective communication</b>	Models & methods	Skilled in using models and methods known to be effective for communication with children.	7.1
	Tools & frameworks	Proficient in use of tools, formats and frameworks dictated by the role.	7.1
	Child-centred	Communicating in a child-centred manner (negotiating children's choice in and control over the approach, process and pace of the communication; using the 'hundred languages of childhood').	2.7 7.1
	Facilitating environment	Providing a facilitating environment which is safe, boundaried, caring, supportive and uninterrupted.	1.8 7.3

	Non-verbal communication	Able to read children's non-verbal communication, through observing paralanguage, body language, play and relational style, and respond appropriately non-verbally as well as directly.	7.1
	Play & creative methods	Incorporating play, activities and visual techniques to complement verbal and written communication.	6.1 7.1
	Interviewing skills	Skilled in interviewing techniques such as listening, prompting, and varied types of cues and questioning.	7.1
	Promoting participation	Using persistence and creativity to elicit children's views, experiences and concerns and taking them into account.	6.1 2.5
	Informing & explaining	Able to provide information and explanations in a clear, tailored and sensitive manner using a range of modes.	7.2 7.9
	Working in a relationship-based manner	Able to engage children, and build, manage, sustain and conclude compassionate, bounded and empathic relationships within which all interventions are situated.	1.7 5.6 7.3

The CCWC taxonomy was subsequently used to structure analysis within this author's empirical study of how social work students within a Masters qualifying programme learned to communicate with children (Lefevre, 2012). That study measured at four time points during the programme students' self-efficacy and applied awareness of the CCWC (obtained through analysis of students' responses to common practice vignettes). It also gathered students' subjective feedback on teaching and learning approaches used and, through follow-up interviews approximately 18 months into qualified practice, students' reflections on their learning journeys. Findings, in the light of pre-existing evidence about effective pedagogical approaches and drawing on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, enabled the sequence of students' learning to be modelled. The study's methodology and findings are discussed in full in that report and further considered in Lefevre (under review, 2013) so are not reproduced here.

Programmes need to provide opportunities for students to develop generic, child-focused, and child-specialist capabilities in 'Knowing', 'Being' and 'Doing'; however the previous practice surveys discussed above make it clear that there is rarely a coherent approach to ensuring that all aspects of

the CCWC are sufficiently covered and integrated. Table 2 proposes these as three strands of learning which should be covered through a qualifying curriculum. The following discussion suggests how this model might be used to develop a coherent and integrated approach to the teaching and learning of communication with children within qualifying social work programmes. There are no strictures about the timing or actual positioning of learning opportunities nor an expectation that the strands are sequential, as students will have varied pathways depending on whether and when they have a placement offering direct contact with children.

*Table 2 Strands of learning through qualifying training*

<b>Pre-course generalist experience with children and adults in personal and work- based situations</b>	↓	<b>Strand 1: from generalist to generic</b>	↓	<b>Strand 2: Developing child-focused capabilities</b>	↓	<b>Strand 3: Developing applied child-specialist capabilities to at least basic level</b>
		<b>Critical reflection on prior generalist experience and self-appraisal</b>		<b>Didactic input through programme on child- focused capabilities</b>		<b>Developing Knowing for specialist role with children</b>
		- Emphasis on transferability of learning → Building realistic self efficacy		- Child development - Children's social worlds - Principles of participation in law & policy - child-centredness		- Purpose and mandate for communication within complexities and challenges of social work role - Law, policy, practice guidance and ethical frameworks
		<b>Encounter with theory/research: developing <i>Knowing</i></b>		<b>Developing child-focused skills through coherent teaching sequence within 30 days skills curriculum: <i>Doing and Being</i></b>		<b>Use of self for the social work role: developing <i>Being</i></b>
	↓	- Naming and situating what was learned experientially - Development of ideas for future testing	↓	- Role play, practice of techniques, tools and approaches - Observation and feedback from peers/tutors/service users	↓	- Tutor and practice educator modelling of specialist capabilities such as critical reflection, compassionate authority, resilience, containment, attunement - Naming of these processes to develop conceptualisation

<b>Admissions interviews</b> Testing of basic generalist proficiencies in embodied communication through interacting with interviewers and other interviewees	↓	<b>Initial experimentation: developing <i>Being</i> and <i>Doing</i></b> Through embodied, experiential, participatory techniques and tutor modelling	↓	<b>Learning about children and the self through Child Observation: <i>Being</i> and <i>Knowing</i></b> - Learning about children within their family and social worlds and how they communicate and engage - Building awareness of own affective responses, developing self-containment	↓	<b>Experimentation with new approaches and use of self in placement settings</b> - Using approaches, skills, values and qualities for communication within social work contexts (e.g. traumatised, frightened, angry and challenging children) - Aiming for child-centredness and participatory working despite constraining or complex roles and contexts
	↓	<b>Consolidation and integration of learning</b> Through reflective seminars, videoing of skills sessions and related assignments	↓	<b>Consolidation and integration of learning</b> Critical reflection on new experiential learning in seminars and supervision to conceptualise and consolidate learning and its transferability	↓	<b>End of programme: re-appraisal against the taxonomy and PCF</b> - Emphasis on transferability of learning for future working situations and identification of future CPD learning goals for the ASYE → Building realistic self efficacy for NQSW practice
	↓	<b>Assessment of readiness for practice in first placement</b> - Appraisal against CCWC taxonomy mapped to PCF - Identifying transferability of learning - Planning personalised learning journey	↓	<b>Assessment of readiness for progression</b> - Assessment of capability through assignments and direct observations (in placement or in skills labs), re-appraised against CCWC taxonomy mapped to PCF. - Refinement of personalised learning journey to guide direction of learning in placement(s)	↓	

### ***Pre-course learning***

Students' starting point in regards to pre-existing competence must be considered first. All students enter qualifying training having had prior experience of communication and engagement with others which will have enabled them to develop generic proficiencies, such as how to negotiate relationships and how to name, convey and read their own and others' emotions and intentions. Some will also have developed 'child-focused' skills, such as how to tailor their language to children's level of understanding. As the Task Force noted, the actual level of academic and practical competence at entry is diverse: courses may be set at either undergraduate or postgraduate levels; admissions requirements for both prior qualifications and pre-course experience vary across the country (as do definitions of what constitutes appropriate experience); cohorts generally include mature students, some of whom will be parents, as well as those in early adulthood.

### ***Strand 1: developing generic capabilities***

It is proposed that the first strand of learning, relating to the development of generic capabilities, should, wherever possible, be completed before students embark on their first placement so they begin with a solid foundation. Opportunities should be provided for students to reflect critically on their pre-course experience so they can evaluate their strengths, gaps in experience and areas of struggle at an early stage, build realistic (not over-confident) self-efficacy, and develop a personal action plan to reach the required level of CCWC by the point of qualification.

Theoretical input in the taught curriculum, through tutor presentations, guided reading and/or problem-based learning approaches, should help students to form abstract conceptualisations about communication (consonant with the 'Knowing' domain of the CCWC model). This stage enables earlier inductive learning to be brought into conscious awareness, named and recognised, and new ideas generated which may be trialled in future practice (Kolb, 1984).

Participatory, experiential learning opportunities for focused experimentation within the taught curriculum can then develop generic aspects of students' 'Being' and 'Doing' capabilities. Theoretical/didactic approaches alone have been found to be insufficient for teaching communication and interpersonal skills; practitioners require additional experiential methods to be used so that abstract concepts are experimented with and reflected upon and learning is embedded (Huerta-Wong & Schoech, 2010; Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). Behavioural approaches to skills acquisition (Doing) may be useful, for example students interviewing each other or service-user educators within



workshops and 'skills-labs', either in real or role-play scenarios with adults (Moss et al, 2007; Koprowska, 2010) or 'simulated' children (Pope, 2002). Feedback can be provided through videoing, and observations/assessment from peers, tutors or service-user educators. Using a recognised interviewing or intervention model such as Egan (2009) can aid conceptual clarity for educators and students alike. Learning may be consolidated and integrated by practice related assignments, such as process recordings, which helps students develop their recall of practice interventions and to develop skills in reflection.

As skills taught behaviourally are not necessarily integrated and developed over time nor transferred into practice (Trevithick et al, 2004), deeper learning can be promoted where an initial commitment to self-directed learning is established and skills teaching is sustained by follow-up interventions, such as supervised practice by someone familiar with the approach (Gleeson, 1992). Engaging students in developing or reviewing their personalised learning plans following initial skills training can signal which capabilities might need to be further developed in practice placements. If these are then taken to the placement, practice educators are enabled to consolidate learning through focused supervision and direct assessment of these skills in practice, but they may need either initial or refresher training from the HEI to ensure they are sufficiently familiar with the skills approaches being taught to students.

There is limited evidence in the literature of how best to promote generic aspects of students' 'Being'. There is, however, a well-theorised epistemology that the methods of teaching, learning and assessment of communicative competence should model the approach itself (Ward, 1995). The 'learning by doing' approach may be integrated with a capability-building approach to developing use of self. Students can learn about relationship-based practice, for example, by having it modelled through a group tutorial approach which strives to create a safe space within which students reflect on a range of emotions and experiences to develop their capacity to build a trusting environment within which they respond empathically, authoritatively, congruently and sensitively to each other (Mensinga, 2011). By modelling participation in action, problem-based learning approaches may enable students to connect with service users' structural experience of oppression (Boylan et al, 2000; Smith & Bush, 2001). Experiential learning from such approaches can then be embedded by opportunities for critical reflection on skills, techniques, qualities and methods, within tutor-led seminars which incorporate theory and feedback (Pope, 2002; Horwath & Thurlow, 2004).

Around the end of the first year of a BA/first term MA, students in England are to be assessed for their 'readiness for practice' prior to their first placement. Where students' communication and interpersonal skills have already been scrutinised either formatively or summatively using observed or videoed role play, process recordings or other related assignments, these could provide a formal measure towards this process, using the CCWC taxonomy as a checklist. Students should then actively develop or review their personalised learning plan which will enable them to meet both PCF requirements and personal goals. Specifically, they would need to determine where their aspirations for future practice seem to lie. Those who intend to work in children's services post-qualification would be best advised to undertake their second, longer placement in that setting, with the shorter first placement in an adults' services setting, and vice versa.

Further experimentation with and consolidation of generic capabilities will occur in students' encounters with service users and carers of all ages, abilities and experiences in their placements. Inductive learning will be promoted in supervision, with the student enabled to name, interpret and make sense of their interactions and dialogues with others and to understand the relationships between people, processes, emotions and events. Learning can be consolidated and integrated through direct observations and assignments which link to practical experience, such as process recordings and case studies. Ongoing conceptualisation of communicative processes should be promoted within 'recall' days or 'theory-to-practice' seminars with academic staff. The end of placement portfolio should include self-appraisal against the PCF/CCWC mapping, leading to a refinement of the student's personalised learning journey to guide planning for the direction of their learning in the final placement.

### ***Strand 2: developing child-focused capabilities***

The second strand of learning (whether concurrent or subsequent) would enable students to begin to develop 'child-focused' capabilities. Although the evidence base for their efficacy is limited, useful methods include: didactic input on underpinning knowledge ('Knowing' domain of the CCWC taxonomy); experiential child observation ('Knowing' and 'Being'); skills acquisition methods; and experimentation with new learning in placement ('Doing') (Luckock *et al.*, 2006). Child-focused understanding and awareness is likely to be provided within the taught curriculum through a range of modules. Child development teaching may provide a baseline for the kinds of vocabulary and concepts children might be able to use and understand at different ages and the impact on

communication of children's adverse experiences, including trauma and insecurity of attachment. Teaching about children's rights and participation should be included in modules on Law/Policy and Values/Ethics. Focused teaching on child-focused methods, skills and techniques should be covered within the new 30-day 'skills curriculum' for England.

Although there is little empirical evidence regarding the benefits of structured child observation exercises, such as that of the amended Tavistock method, there are many descriptions of its helpfulness in promoting the development of students' understanding of children's internal and social worlds and their use of self (Trowell & Paton, 1998). A focus on 'Being' rather than 'Doing' in the observation itself promotes students' internal reflections on the self as an observer. This may build awareness of their own affective responses and develop a 'contained' space within themselves within which they can think about the other and develop their empathic attunement to children's internal worlds (Ruch, 2007). Tutor-led seminar discussions and guided reading making links to theoretical perspectives enable abstract conceptualisations to be formed about some of the different ways in which children communicate and engage and relate in their social worlds both directly and indirectly, for example through body language and paralanguage. Learning may be consolidated and integrated through assignments which focus on what has been learned about the self as an observer, about children's experiences and about communication and relationships. Students could then experiment with new understandings about communication in direct practice with children within placement settings.

Finding space in a crowded curriculum for both the observations themselves and reflective seminars to conceptualise learning is likely to be challenging, but the new 'skills curriculum' does provide space for this. Those students who intend to work post qualification in an adults service setting where contact with children is unlikely (such as with older people), and where they have prior experience with children, might decide alternatively to observe an adult where additional specialist communication skills might be needed, perhaps due to a condition such as aphasia.

### ***Strand 3: developing applied child-specialist capabilities***

The third strand would enable the development of applied child-specialist capabilities, so the student can operate to at least a basic level by the point of qualification. Advancing these would then be within the remit of continuing professional development, such as within the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) training requirements which will be mandatory in England (SWRB, 2010b).

Opportunities for active experimentation with engagement and communication should ideally be offered through direct work during the placement with children who encompass a wide range of experiences, characteristics and capabilities. Wherever possible, the level of pre-course experience with children and adults in different kinds of personal and work-based settings should guide the nature of practice learning opportunities offered. For example, students entering a children's services placement with little or no pre-course experience of children would ideally be provided initially with opportunities for more basic communication and engagement opportunities with children.

Reflective learning in supervision, and assessed observations by the practice educator, would be supplemented by ongoing taught input in the university; this would include the challenges of communication in social work contexts ('Knowing') and additional models, methods and skills ('Doing'). Ongoing development of use of self ('Being') would be reinforced by tutors and practice educators modelling key qualities and providing critically reflective learning spaces within which these processes could be named, so that they remain in students' conscious awareness. Learning would be further integrated and consolidated through supervision and practice focused assignments. Students would be re-appraised at the end of the programme against the PCF/CCWC mapping so that transferability of proficiency for future employment can support the move to the workplace, and future learning needs can be identified for the ASYE.

## **Concluding thoughts**

This paper has offered a model for how communication with children might be conceptualised and integrated through qualifying education. While the discussion has been situated within the constraints and opportunities common to social work education in England, the suggested learning and development sequence could well apply to other countries with a similar conceptualisation of the social work role with children. Student capability in other countries could be assessed against the CCWC taxonomy alone, without reference to the PCF.

Some of the proposals here may be experienced as more aspirational than others for programmes which already feel over-stretched. In England at least, the reduction in placement time, returning 30 days to the HEI for a 'skills curriculum', may provide the space that is needed for the suggested teaching and learning approaches not already employed by individual programmes. However, it is

not intended that the key goal is increasing content or pedagogical opportunities, but rather re-envisioning the overall approach so that the 'connective tissue' is provided which enables students to learn through a variety of experiences and make explicit sense of the interconnectedness of these. This should not need substantial additional time or resource, but, as suggested previously (Lefevre *et al.*, 2008), it may be helpful for programmes to designate a 'children's lead' to ensure integrated and coherent coverage of the CCWC across the taught and practice curriculum.

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